

## God Yearns for Us

### Hosea 11:1-11

<sup>1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

<sup>2</sup> The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

<sup>3</sup> Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.

<sup>4</sup> I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

<sup>5</sup> They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.

<sup>6</sup> The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.

<sup>7</sup> My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

<sup>8</sup> How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

<sup>9</sup> I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

<sup>10</sup> They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.

<sup>11</sup> They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Do you remember when a child stole your heart? The child may have been your own child or grandchild. The child may have been a niece or nephew. The child may have been a cousin. The child may have been a relative of a relative or a friend, but some way or another, before you knew how it happened you were in love! But we also know the order they get the more independent and challenging the little one becomes.

At the core, our scripture is one of the oldest stories there is. It first got told in Genesis. It got told in a thousand different ways throughout the pages of the Bible. God

loves us, entirely. God creates us, delivers us, and tends us. The more God pursues, the more we turn away. It is the story of our shame. It is the story of God's grace. We know how it ends—God does not give up. Our knowledge of the ending may dull our hearing to the retelling of grace that once amazed. Hosea does not tell; he shows. What he shows are portraits of a love whose beginnings we cannot remember and whose end echoes with the roar of transforming power. He walks us down the long hall of our communal memory and points to the pictures hanging on its walls.

Here are snapshots of tender, perfect moments. A mother bends over her baby's crib, lifts his chubby body to her face, smells his sweet baby breath, presses her lips to his belly. His dark thick hair, his fat thigh rolls, his bow lips—she loves every inch of him, and entirely. Her love flows not simply because he is beautiful (although he is), but because he is hers. This mother's whole being leans toward this baby, whom she adores, and she pledges everything she has to his nurture and care. She would do everything for this child. She would give up everything for this child. There is a commercial with a mother climbing a play-scape, like at McDonalds or Caesar-land, to rescue her child who has managed to go up, but is now too afraid to come down.

We take another step down the hall, to gaze at another picture. The mother is teaching her toddler to walk. The picture shows a scene frozen in time, but we can piece together what happens before and after it. "That's it, you've got it, come to Mama," she coos. He waddles forward, face turned up toward hers, eyes shining with the thrill of his power and with an adoration that mirrors hers. He falls, he cries, she scoops him up in her arms. She wipes away the tears and tends the little hurts. He will not remember this, but she will.

Hosea walks us down the hall, showing us portraits of things we cannot remember. God is that mother, Hosea reminds us; we were that baby, that toddler. We do not remember, but God does. There are more pictures to see, but we might rather turn our eyes: pictures of how we ran when God called; pictures of the tantrums we threw, the promises we broke, the wreckage we created; pictures of our violence, our hatred, our

self-loathing. We are the children who were loved from the start; we are the children who turned away. God stood on the porch calling after us as we sped away; we broke God's heart. **Stacey Simpson Duke**

The prophet Hosea speaks compellingly to the situation of the northern kingdom in the final days before it falls to Assyria, interpreting God's relation with God's people through the lens of his own life experience. He sees parallels between Israel's faithlessness and that of his unfaithful wife, Gomer. In our scripture, Israel's waywardness is likened to that of a wayward son. Hosea's prophetic critique of social, political, and religious disintegration in the face of Assyria's imperialistic aggression is insistent. In his view, the turning to political alliances with Syria and Egypt and the turning to idols ("the Baals") demonstrate that God's reliability and God's claims have been forgotten, and the covenant relationship has been broken. There are consequences looming on the horizon in the form of the collapse of the northern kingdom and Assyria's triumph.

Although the text is very context specific, it speaks powerfully beyond its time and place to people of God in every time and place. These are issues and themes arising that have broad application.

The theological question "What is God like?" is illumined in the text. The tender care of God for the people of God is portrayed as that of a parent with beloved children: teaching them to walk, bending down to them, lifting them up as infants to the divine cheek, feeding, healing, leading (vv. 3-4). These show divine accommodation, incarnation, self-emptying (*kenōsis*), and making room (*zimzum*) for the other are here with this picture of God as one who *bends down and lifts up*.

John Calvin spoke of divine "accommodation" in terms of God's self-revelation. The radical difference between God and human beings makes a certain accommodation on God's part necessary to communicate with us at all. With respect to Scripture, Calvin commented, "As nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us." God lovingly accommodates to our capacities.

The wonder of the Word made flesh (John 1) in the incarnation is also called to mind by this image. Karl Barth speaks of incarnation as a movement, originating in the divine freedom of love, of divine "condescension" or "humiliation" (a bending down) that reveals the reconciling reality of "God with us." The ancient Christian hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 similarly gives account of divine self-emptying in which one who "was in the form of God ... emptied himself," taking on "the form of a slave."

In the Jewish teaching about the act of creation, the God who is "all in all" makes room for an "other" to be. In a sense, God creates a space for another (us) to be and to become. This is part of God's divine accommodation, self-emptying, and incarnation. All these point toward a vision of God as one who "bends down and lifts up" like the loving parent from Hosea. This is what God is like. As the passage proceeds with this portrayal of God, we are all the more astonished that the people of God should turn away from such a one to lesser gods. They sought other alliances and went after idols of their own construction. They had divided loyalties and turned to idolatry.

Idolatry is not having images and icons and works of art and concepts that may (or may not) *point* us toward the God, but mistaking these pointers for God. In the normal anxiety that attends finite and fragile human existence, it is natural to seek to secure ourselves, and idolatry arises in that self-seeking and self-securing activity. We invest ourselves in intermediate goods, like national security and personal well-being, but we are disappointed because these things inevitably fail. Whenever we take something out of its rightful place in our lives and raise it to the status of the ultimate, we break the harmony of life. Whatever mundane good we make ultimate is thereby overburdened and destroyed in our very act of raising it to ultimacy. It cannot fulfill a God-shaped job description and loses its quality as a gift of grace when it becomes the central focus of our lives. Too often you put our money or finances, our health, our relationships, our jobs, even our families in the place of supremacy. But, only God is ultimate, only God can secure us and secure us, finally, against the need to be secured.

God is our source and our end, the ground of our being and our heart's true home.

When we turn away from the source of our being and integrity, we fall into a kind of disintegrated nothingness. No longer oriented toward God, we are dis-oriented.

Wandering from our true home, we are lost. Idolatry, among other things, is a pattern of self-destruction. The divine response in this text is not unlike that of most loving parents who are never more angry with their children than when they do self-destructive things.

God's anger has a distinctive character, beyond typical human manifestations. "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst" (v. 9). Anger does not lash out or cause God to turn away from God's people. Instead, God's "compassion grows warm and tender" (v. 8). God's wrath is the fire of God's love, ordered toward restoration, not destruction.

Our scripture ends with a hopeful word. Waywardness and its consequences do not have the last word. God's intentions are still redemption, restoration, and return. The ones who have turned away, become disoriented, and wandered from home are not left to their own devices. They are called home, and like lion cubs responding to the summons of the parent lion, like doves with their homing instinct, they will return (vv. 10-11). The wayward children are still beloved children of a God who bends down and lifts up. **Anna Case-Winters**

If you thought that God no longer yearns for you because of your past rebellion, Hosea reminds us that God still remembers God love for you and only wants you back home where you belong!